

## El's Never Ending Summer by rosethrn

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**Summary:**

Eleven is back, and after closing the gate, the party has a lot of adjusting to do.

or;

Moments shared between El and each member of the new and improved party - after all, they are still kids.

## El's Never Ending Summer

El had been back for six months (or maybe seven? She didn't count as diligently now that she had returned to her friends), and had still not been permitted to leave the cabin after the night she closed the gate. Initially, it seemed like a callous rule, being that she had been locked up nearly a year and was now unable to see her friends -- to see Mike -- without Hopper or Joyce or one of the older kids hovering nearby. She was wistfully reminded of the liberty of being just the boys' secret, hidden in Mike's basement and free to roam with them so long as she kept her identity unknown.

But as they had encountered more serious things than a lost boy and the mysterious bad men, they were forced to enlist the adults in their troubles, and suddenly everything was tangled up. More importantly, El was separated from the friends she had come to love as family, and she was sick and tired of hiding from everything. It had been half a year. She wanted to respect Hopper's rules, but the weekly visits from Mike and Dustin and Lucas (and even Max after a while) just weren't enough.

So came Operation Get El Outside, as Dustin stupidly called it. Mike wanted it to be at his house, so the gang could play D&D for the first time as a real party, but the Wheelers' parents still didn't really know about El. Plus, Max added, her brother would be extremely suspicious if she was vanishing off to a boy's house, God forbid. And so they decided on the arcade; arguably, it was more dangerous, but if El was properly disguised, then there would hardly be anyone around paying enough attention to question them. It was a sound plan.

"No," said Hopper.

This filled Eleven with rage. She and the others had spent days meticulously planning how to present Operation Get El Outside to Hopper, and for nothing? She knew better though; she was learning to control her raw impulses, because no, blowing up would definitely not get her what she wanted.

She kept her voice level and laden with reason: "We follow your rules. We go at night. I can wear a ... disguise," she said carefully,

because she had just learned the word from Mike earlier that day. “I won’t be stupid.”

He looked at her, dissatisfied but sympathetic. Following the night she agreed to return home, she had been entirely submissive and accepting of his rules. But he had rewarded that; was the Snowball not enough? She had certainly gotten up to enough trouble with the Wheeler kid to satisfy her taste for adventure.

But despite his reluctance, he understood. No kid deserved to be locked up forever, although it was indisputably for her own good. He sighed, long and loud, the way he did when deciding what action to take on a case at the station.

“Fine,” he capitulated, just to see the smile erupt on El’s face. “But not for over two hours, and I’m going to be parked right outside the whole time. No funny business.”

El nodded speechlessly, so many times that she thought she would be dizzy. She wrapped Hopper in tight hug, and he, while usually averse to this kind of affection with most people, held her too.

“I promise,” Eleven whispered, and Hopper knew these were the most sacred words to El since the moment Mike explained them to her.

The following day was a Saturday, and the day they’d all been waiting for. Only Dustin and Mike appeared at the Hoppers’ front door, since they were always cautious not to bring too many visitors at once to avoid the risk of drawing too much attention. The others had pledged to meet up with them at the arcade.

El’s “disguise” consisted of Hopper’s smallest (yet still perpetually oversized) jacket, jeans, and boots. She wore a hat that for the most part contained her wild curly hair, which they hadn’t yet shortened despite Hopper’s promises to cut it. Mike contributed a pair of Nancy’s sunglasses for outside, but she was allowed to remove them inside if it was safe to.

One short knock. Pause. Short, long, short, short. Morse code for ‘El’ had become Mike’s secret way of letting her know he was visiting. The others had picked up on it too, trying to decide on their own clever knocks for the cabin door. Dustin had initially attempted to

knock his own name, but after thirty seconds of confused bumping on the door, El had just opened it out of pity.

She unlocked the door to greet Mike and Dustin, full of nervous excitement to be finally leaving. They hopped on their bikes, and El was more than happy to be on the back of Mike's bicycle again, feeling nearly free -- aside from Hopper following close behind in his car to wait outside of the arcade. The trip was mostly quiet, aside from Dustin's occasional babbling about various arcade games and how to play them. The term "joystick" was completely lost on El.

They arrived and headed in, El keeping her head down and shrinking behind Dustin and Mike, worried of prying eyes and suspicious onlookers. But none confronted her; instead, she was delightfully surprised to find that most of the kids were too occupied with the games to notice the group as they entered.

"Check it out," Dustin whispered. Most of the kids had crowded around a game near the front that Mike and Dustin didn't recognize. They caught sight of Max's red hair flashing among the crowd and Lucas and Will could be spotted at the front.

"Wait here with El, I'll go see what it is," Mike said, brushing through the crowd to find the other three party members.

"I know exactly what that is. It's a claw machine!" Dustin said, excitement practically dripping from his voice.

"Claw machine?" El repeated with uncertainty.

"It must be brand new! I've heard about those things. I'd be great at it. There's a specific strategy, see--"

"Let's try it," said El, grabbing Dustin by the hand and pulling him towards the front of the crowd.

Dustin fished seventy five cents from his pocket, whispering obscenities concerning the price. It started up, the party and a few onlookers watching.

Dustin steered the claw towards the back to pick up a large 3 Musketeers, slamming a hand down on the button to send it down.

“Come on, come on, come on, gimme that nougat.”

The claw scraped up the candy bar and lifted it nearly six inches before it slipped out of the grasp. “Ah, shit! This game is rigged, there was no way I could have gotten a better grasp than that. God damn it!”

Dustin gave the side of the machine a good kick, prompting Keith to shout from the corner, “You break that and you’re paying, twerp! And that thing’s brand new!” Dustin hung his head.

“Why don’t you try again, Dustin,” Will said, donating a quarter to his cause. Max and Mike each chipped in another one, although Lucas shook his head and claimed that he may as well just throw the damned quarter away.

“Alright, ya damned thing, let’s give this another shot. For real this time,” muttered Dustin as he entered another three quarters. El had finally caught on to the gist of the game, with a little explanation from Mike, and was now watching more closely, her interest piqued.

“Okay, guys, this is it. Three quarters of a dollar, on the line. The fate of a 3 Musketeers bar, hanging in the balance--”

“Oh, hit the button you dork,” Max interjected, and Dustin obliged, sending the claw down once again.

It scraped up not one, but two 3 Musketeers bars, and reached the same height as before, the candy teetering within the weak grasp of the claw. Suddenly they stopped wobbling, and at that point the claw had made it all the way up, and it just needed to bring them back to the front of the machine.

This unexpected twist unleashed an avalanche of advice from the party.

“Slowly!”

“Are you kidding? Quickly! It’ll fall otherwise!”

“I can’t believe he got two!”

“Come on, Dustin, go!”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” Dustin ordered as he maneuvered the claw towards them again, the six kids staring closely as the candy remained steady in the grasp of the claw.

And it dropped.

“I did it. I did it!” The party cheered as Dustin retrieved the two candy bars from the machine with glee.

“How did he manage to keep a hold of them?” asked someone nearby in disbelief.

“Talent!” Dustin said, parading around the arcade with his candy held high. Mike chuckled and looked at Eleven, who was smiling so widely she looked as if she would burst.

“Let me get that for you,” he winked, wiping the trickle of blood from El’s nose.